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SUBJECT: (C) EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION? ACADEMICS ON CHANGING CHINA'S
POLITICAL SYSTEM

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (c), (d)

11. (C) Summary: We offer the views of several local experts on China's political development. While the consensus view is that the Central Government has a firm hold on power, and that economic growth dulls popular demand for political change, there is also a strong undercurrent that unrest at the local level could challenge the system. The inability of locals to form political organizations remains the biggest impediment to a grass-roots challenge to authority. However, the seeds of such organizations may already be being sown through economic organizations and the encouragement, in part with the Central Government's blessing, of the building of civil society. End summary.

You Say You Want a Revolution

12. (S) During a September 17 discussion in Shanghai, democracy activist and head of the NGO World China Institute Li Fan (strictly protect) said that relations between local governments and their citizens are strained to the point that one of two things will happen: either the party will begin implementing political reforms or it will dig in and try to hold the line. Li (whose father Li Qinghua, an aide to late Premier Zhou Enlai, was China's Ambassador to East Germany and India, and later the head of CCTV), believes that the party is currently opting for a "hold-the-line" approach, aware that it must eventually reform but cautiously seeking a safe path to do so. However, grassroots pressure for meaningful change is growing stronger and may force the party's hand sooner than it would like.

13. (S) According to Li, the current political system is too old, too entrenched, and too ossified to implement the sorts of democratic changes that the public will demand. Eventually Chinese society and the state will come into conflict. Whether through an armed conflict or a "color revolution," Li believes that the current system must be overthrown to establish a new, more democratic order. Society is becoming more radical and violent, Li said. While he still hopes and works for peaceful reforms within the system, his conclusion from working with

people at the grassroots level across the country is that revolution is inevitable.

Anger in the Localities: One Henan Village's Tale of Woe

¶4. (C) For instance, in March 2007, Li and his organization helped a candidate in Rongcheng County in Henan Province win a seat on the county-level People's Congress. In this man's village, there had been no village elections for the past 7-8 years, because local leaders feared they would be defeated. After this man was elected, he began raising the issue of village elections, eventually bringing enough pressure to bear from the county government that the village government acquiesced to demands to hold such elections. In early September, when the elections were supposed to take place, there was a violent confrontation between backers of local officials and the farmers who showed up to vote. The police arrived and detained everyone. The police eventually let the friends of the local officials go but refused to allow the farmers to leave.

¶5. (C) The newly elected county-level People's Congress representative was enraged by this turn of events and went to see the county government to demand to know why the farmers were still being held. The county government officials refused to see him and he returned to his home in the village. The next day, the police detained him for 6-8 hours for questioning. Out of shame over his inability to assist the people he had been trying to protect, the man went home and killed himself. His relatives tried to take the body to the county government building in protest but were detained at the highway off ramp leading into the county seat. The police refused to let the family leave the area, forcing them to stay with the decomposing body for three days in intense heat. Li Fan said it is impossible to introduce reforms from within the system in a place like this.

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Revolution? It's the Economy Stupid!

¶6. (S) During a September 20 discussion, Jiaotong University International and Public Affairs School Dean Hu Wei (strictly protect) agreed that a revolution was a theoretical possibility but not within the next 10-20 years. The Central Government is doing too good a job at providing opportunities for economic growth for people to consider a complete overthrow of the entire system. Although the countryside is growing slower than the cities, farmers are still far better off today than they were 20 years ago. Farmers today have food, shelter, clothing, and a chance to earn money. An economic catastrophe--severe recession, currency crisis, etc.--would be needed to push people over the edge, Hu said. During a September 28 discussion, Nanjing University Professor Gu Su (strictly protect) echoed Professor Hu's perspective, telling us he does not expect a revolution anytime soon, as the "conditions are not mature." The public is too wedded to stability and is enjoying too much economic prosperity for people to think seriously about revolution.

The Headless Dragons

¶7. (S) Shanghai Municipal People's Congress researcher Zhou Meiyun (strictly protect) was also present at the September 17 discussion with Li Fan. She disagreed with Li's apocalyptic vision of Chinese politics, arguing that there is no alternative organizational structure in place that could carry out a revolution. Moreover, the Central Government has done and is doing a remarkable job of cracking down on any sort of political organization in the countryside. While economic organizations are tolerated, the state has repeatedly demonstrated both the

willingness and the ability to eliminate any sort of political organization, particularly any that threatens stability. Separately, Professor Hu agreed that the Chinese leadership does a good job of keeping the people divided. The leadership fears the people and has made every effort to keep them as "a group of dragons with no heads" (qun long wu shou).

Old Wine in New Bottles: Can the 8 Democratic Parties Save China?

¶18. (S) Zhou is optimistic that alternate centers of power could arise to democratically challenge the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) monopoly on power without the necessity of revolution. She said that the organizational structure and mobilization know-how exists within China's so-called Eight Democratic Parties--the minority parties supported by the CCP and used to showcase China's "democracy." One of the parties had recently asked Zhou to join. She declined, though, when it became clear that the party was in lock-step with the CCP on all issues. She expressed confidence, however, that ultimately, a challenge to the CCP's supremacy will emanate through one of these parties.

¶19. (C) When we discussed the Eight Democratic Parties with Professor Hu, however, he argued that these parties are merely corrupt branches of a corrupt tree. He described them as "parasites" leeching off of the largess of the Communist Party. They owe their continued existence, funding, and whatever limited power and influence they retain to the good graces of the CCP. It is in their interest to maintain their subservient role to the CCP. Professor Hu asserted that alternative parties will ultimately arise, although he has no idea how, given China's current political climate.

¶10. (S) As an interesting aside, Zhou mentioned that she had met on September 12-13 with Zhejiang Province-based Chen Yiming (strictly protect), Head of the Wenling Municipal Propaganda Department's Theory Office, Deputy Director of the Wenling Municipal People's Democratic Consultation Work Office, and author of Wenling's political experimentation (Ref A). Chen had approached her with the idea of working together to start a new political party. Zhou told Poloff she had informed Chen that such ideas are dangerous. She did not, however, say whether she had refused Chen's proposal.

Organizational Seeds Already Being Sown

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¶11. (S) Li Fan acknowledged that lack of organization is a problem for potential revolutionaries in China. He believes that alternate centers of power will gradually coalesce, but would not speculate on what form they will ultimately take. He noted, however, that there are already people trying to organize and mobilize people in the countryside. While these people are not organizing political parties, per se, they are trying to establish networks of like-minded people in geographical areas and then connecting these networks with each other to accomplish goals. These people understand that isolated, they are impotent, but organized, they can implement change.

¶12. (S) As an example, Li cited Hubei People's Congress Representative Yao Lifa. Yao, a former county-level People's Congress representative, traveled to Hunan this summer to meet with farmers and encourage them to participate in local elections. No formal organization was set up, but in essence, Yao was training people on the merits of working together.

¶13. (S) According to Li, the New Socialist Countryside program developed by the Central Government to help ameliorate rural poverty is also helping develop nascent civil organizations.

The Central Government knows it cannot possibly solve all of the problems in the countryside on its own, due to lack of both skills and the funding. To help the people help themselves and to use outside expertise, the New Socialist Countryside program encourages NGO participation--particularly in poverty alleviation efforts--and the development of civil society. Li said that the Central Government is aware of the potential dangers of allowing the development of civil society in the countryside, but assesses that the danger of the growing rich-poor income distribution gap is greater.

Comment

115. (S) Although Zhou, Chen, and Li offered slightly different predictions of China's political development, what they have in common is years working together--often successfully--to empower people to participate in the political system. In particular, they have trained local People's Congresses on their rights in an effort to help them assert greater oversight and authority over the government. These three are also working closely with other like-minded individuals throughout China to effect change from within the system. All three seek implementation of a truly democratic, multi-party system in China.

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